Halse Anderson, Laurie. 2010. *Forge*. New York, NY: Antheum.

Grade Level: 8-9

*Forge*  is a sequel to Laurie Halse Anderson’s award winning novel *Chains*. While the narrative voice from *Chains*, Isabel, is part of *Forge*, Curzon takes center stage. Curzon is an African-American teenage boy who has escaped from the binds of slavery. Much of the journey between the end of *Chains* and Curzon walking into the middle of a battle in the American Revolution takes place in flashbacks. Curzon saves a Continental soldier and is drawn back into the army. After his service in place of his master, Curzon had seen more than enough war for a lifetime. As he is placed with a new unit, he begins to become more and more devoted to the Patriot cause. His unit accepts him with little questioning about where he came from. Curzon and his unit end up at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777/1778.

The soldiers endure a harsh winter with little food. Most came unprepared with no shoes or warm clothing. The army could not provide uniforms, food was late or spoiled, and the soldiers had to build their own shelters in the freezing cold with snow falling around them. While some soldiers do desert their post, most stay. General George Washington is hopeful that come spring the war will be over quickly. Curzon and his unit go through several changes over the course of the winter, including a new commanding officer who has it out for Curzon. When his old master arrives at Valley Forge, Curzon is forced back into slavery. His master denies having granted him freedom after he served during the beginning of the war. Curzon is placed in a position in a house and is reunited with Isabel, who has also been enslaved again. Curzon immediately begins planning their escape.

Curzon’s unit begins to plan for his escape too. Interwoven throughout all of Curzon’s personal drama is the continued drama of Valley Forge. Illness begins to spread and a new French commander arrives to train the remaining soldiers. Curzon and Isabel are able to make their escape with the help of Curzon’s old unit. They escape while soldiers are marching out of Valley Forge.

Halse Anderson weaves facts about the Revolutionary War into the fictional story with ease. Each chapter in the novel begins with a quote that relates to both the war and the fictional story. The quotes provide an interesting time line and perspective on many of the happenings during the war and at Valley Forge. While many of the reviews I read suggested this for grades 5-8, I personally believe this novel would be better placed at an 8th or 9th grade level. Students in these grades would be able to better understand many of the nuances of the novel and Curzon’s experience. There are no sexual scenes except for a kissing scene. There is a lot of violence in the novel, but it is realistic and needed to explain the horrors of war, especially the horrors of war in the 1700s. The novel begins with a soldier being killed, which is described in great detail. If adequate explanation about the nature of war during the 1700s has been offered, students should be prepared for these types of scenes in the novel.

The description of Valley Forge and the despair that the soldiers faced is well researched and described throughout the novel. Halse Anderson actually went to Valley Forge and walked around barefoot in the snow to research the novel. Her duty to the facts and her realistic descriptions bring the characters and novel to life while educating the reader about an important part of the Revolutionary War.

Teaching Ideas: (taken from: <http://classroombookshelf.blogspot.com/2010/11/forge.html>)

* ***Slavery in the North.***What do your students know about slavery in the North? Before reading *Chains* or *Forge*, have students list what they know and what questions they have. After they finish one or both books, they can examine Douglas Harper’s well-documented “Slavery in the North” website at: <http://www.slavenorth.com/index.html> as a starting point for research .
* ***Paired Texts.*** Have some students in class read the novel *Forge* and others read *Washington at Valley Forge,* a nonfiction chapter bookby Russell Freedman (see below). Use book-based groups as a “home base” for exploring each text, the conditions faced by the soldiers, and the political climate during the winter of 1777-1778. Next, jigsaw the students in mixed-book groups. Have students compare and contrast their understandings of the events at Valley Forge. What similarities and differences emerge? How were their understandings of the history shaped by their readings of historical fiction versus nonfiction ? If time permits, all students could read both books, for a more in-depth examination of both this period during the American Revolution and the genres of historical fiction and nonfiction literature.
* ***Local History.*** If you teach in one of the original thirteen colonies, who were the African-American soldiers who fought from your town, city, county, or state? Go to your local historical society or seek out the reference librarian at your local library, and try to locate the names of African-Americans who fought during the American Revolution. Using the print and digital resources available to you through your local library and historical society, have students research these soldiers. Who were these men? What did they do before and after the war? Were they free or enslaved? Did they have families ? There are many ways to share this knowledge with the community. Students could write and illustrate their own historical fiction or biographies. As a class, they could write a collected biography of these men and women. Or, with the help of the historical society and/or library staff students could create an exhibit to put on display honoring these veterans.
* ***Camp Conditions and Supplies***. Compare and contrast the conditions in Valley Forge with conditions experienced by American soldiers stationed overseas in Afghanistan and Iraq during the early stages of the respective invasions in 2001 and 2003. Using the digital databases available through your local library, locate newspaper accounts of the conditions in the 21st century and compare them to conditions at Valley Forge. What problems were experienced? What caused a lack of supplies? Who was to blame? What similarities exist between these very different events, despite the difference in time periods? Who ultimately benefits from these wars, and at whose risk or expense?
* ***Integrated Armed Forces***. In the Appendix of *Forge*, author Laurie Halse Anderson states, “The American Revolution was the last war in which black and white Americans served in integrated units until the Korean War in 1950” (p. 288). Have students discuss their reactions to that statement. Are they surprised? What assumptions lie beneath their reactions? Explore some of the documents and photographs on the “Desegregation of the Armed Forces” section of the Harry Truman Presidential Library Webpage at: <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=chronology>. What are some of the similarities and differences between the experiences of black soldiers in the 18th century and the 20th century? What were some of the reasons why it took so long to desegregate the military? Is segregation still practiced in the military today? To explore more closely the roles African-American soldiers played in World War II, go to “African-Americans During World War II” at the National Archives at <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/ww2-pictures/#army> .

Discussion Guide: http://books.simonandschuster.net/Forge/Laurie-Halse-Anderson/9781416961444/reading\_group\_guide